

### **John 8:31-36**

<sup>31</sup>Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; <sup>32</sup>and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” <sup>33</sup>They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free’?”

<sup>34</sup>Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup>The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. <sup>36</sup>So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.”



### **SERMON FOR SUNDAY, OCTOBER 29<sup>TH</sup>, 2023 REFORMATION SUNDAY**

I had a lot of great courses in my seminary education in Philadelphia in early 2000's. I loved studying the Old Testament. I loved studying the gospels, and the letters of Paul. I hated Greek...and Hebrew! But they were important for getting a complete understanding of these ancient biblical texts.

But the course I loved the most was a Doctorate level course taught by Professor Tim Wengert, one of the world's most famous Luther scholars on earth both then and now. This was the fall of 2004. He has since retired from his seminary teaching, but still does some consulting for our church, the ELCA, others.

The course was sort of an independent study course, where you were required to come up with a topic, do your own research, write a paper on your topic, and then, the hard part... defend it in front of both Dr. Wengert and the rest of the doctorate level students in the class. A somewhat daunting task for me at the time, with all these doctorate level students.

The topic I chose was on the ways Luther used “social media” in his day...the printing press...local papers called “tracts” that he used to hand out to his students, his community, and anyone who would take one and read it.

So, on the very first day of class...as the dozen or so of us who had signed up for this grad level course anxiously awaited what Dr. Wengert was going to say to start out. After introducing himself, he went over the syllabus of the course, then looked around at the group, and said this. “Everyone gets an A in my class!” And he said it with enthusiasm. Everyone gets an “A” in my class.

Now, the group looked at one another in disbelief, and said to Dr. Wengert, “Say what!? Did we hear you right? Everyone gets a “A” before we even begin the class?” And he said,

“Yep, that’s the deal. I trust that since you’ve signed up for this level course, you’ve obviously had success in your seminary education thus far. I don’t want you to have to worry about stressing out about a grade. I want you to have the freedom learn...not worry about getting a grade. So I’ve taken care of that for you.”

When I think of all the courses I’ve taken over the years, from elementary, junior high, high school, college, and seminary, that was singly the most freeing 7 words I’d ever heard...”Everyone gets an ‘A’ in this class.”

And guess what it did for me, and the other members of our cohort. It freed us up to dive into the course...into our research topic...and we did it with joy and enthusiasm. The pressure was off as far as worrying about getting a good grade. Our grade for the course had already been determined for us by a generous professor, who knew exactly what he was doing when he did this.

And boy did we dive into our respective topics. The course was really fun, and entertaining. I learned so much from the other students and the topics they chose. We supported one another when we got stuck. We shared our joy when we were finished. Amazing! We did nothing to deserve this grade. Our skills hadn’t been tested yet by this professor.

What a generous, and yet, seemingly frivolous offer, I thought. It was risky on his part. But, with this “A” grade given to us up front, gone was the pressure of working for a good grade. Gone was the worry about what the professor and my classmates were going to say. And it was replaced with a sense of relief...of joy...and mostly, of freedom. Freedom to explore my subject. Freedom from worry and stress and pressure to get a good grade. All because at the very beginning of our class, Dr. Wengert said that we all were getting an “A” in the course.

Did any of us slack off and try to do the minimum, since we knew we were all going to get a “A” grade? Absolutely not. In fact, it worked just the opposite. The whole class buckled down to the task at hand, not because we felt we had to, but because we were free to jump into our topics. And Professor Wengert was there to help us. Get where I’m going with this as far as “freedom” is concerned?

At this font...the day you were baptized...and that priest, pastor, or minister said those words over you, with your parents and family present, along with the whole congregation, “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,” God was essentially saying to you and to all assembled that day, NAME, you get an “A” in life. The pressure’s off. You are free to live into the world. This hostile, broken, deadly world.”

In other words, your fate with God Almighty had been sealed, and there was, is, will be nothing you could ever do to change that. You in effect, were given an “A” in life before you

had even begun. You didn't do anything to deserve it. You couldn't have earned it by anything you did. It's a free gift from God, given to you in your baptism. Free! Gift! Did I mention the words, FREE? And GIFT? The stress of thinking that you have to do something, or be something, in order to earn God's favor, was removed from you. In that water, and with those words, "I baptize you in the name of the F,S, HS", God claimed you.

Like Dr. Wengert's doctorate level course in Philadelphia in 2004, you were freed *from* sin. Freed *from* death. Freed *from* the devil's hold on you. BUT...you were also free, "to" (that's to.) Free *to* live into that freedom. Free *to* live into the world out there. Free *to* serve others. Free *to* serve God. Free *to* serve your neighbor. Even those neighbors you don't know. Or don't particularly like.

In that freedom, you were called to serve the world. That dangerous, deadly, hostile world out there. A world of war, and hatred, natural disaster, and injustice, and challenge. A world that beats us down at every turn. A world that wants your very soul.

Yes, like my seminary course where I got an undeserved "A", for doing nothing...as a baptized child of God, each of YOU gets that same "A", in your life, if you will. You did nothing to earn it. You don't deserve it based on your own merits. But it's yours...this free gift of new life in Christ Jesus. And with it, comes the freedom to serve God and neighbor. Freedom to strive for peace and justice everywhere. Freedom to serve all people, following the example of Jesus. Freedom to live among God's faithful people. All things that we commit to when we remember our own baptism.

So today, I just want to remind you that in your baptism, you got an "A" grade, to use my seminary example. You were given life beyond the grave, forgiveness of all your sins, and the promise of new life in Jesus Christ. Undeserved. Unmerited. Unearned. A free gift. All, before you had even begun to live your life

So, go into the world. Today. Now. Even at our advanced ages. There is no retirement age for a Christian. You don't check out of life just because you're over 65. Go. Marked with the cross of Christ, make disciples of others. Do your part to bring shalom to the world. You're free to go ahead and do it...really!

Thanks be to God. Amen? Amen.

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